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ABSTRACT

A study of two teachers and four secondary level English classes examined how traditional methods of teaching literature were replaced by more interactive and integrated approaches to text, based primarily upon a whole language philosophy. Intervention aspects purposely remained open-ended to accommodate each teacher's understandings and preferences. Built-in, weekly, three-way meetings between researcher and teachers created the necessary interaction for grounded theory to become operative. Quantitative data included surveys, teacher tests, student work samples, and gradebook records of student scores. Teachers read literature regarding interactive teaching methods, and, for 5 weeks, ongoing coaching sessions and researcher participant observations enabled teachers and students to experiment with interactive methods in terms of reading. Lorraine, a ninth-grade teacher, dropped inhibiting methods she had developed over the years and invited and weighed suggestions, adapting them to her needs and those of her students. She recognized the extent to which she had dominated the entire teaching/learning situation and noted the consequent negative effect on students. Sarah, an eighth-grade teacher, identified control as the major issue in her classroom. Her students liked and admired her intense desire to get them to learn, but they resisted her regimentation and disciplinary methods. The students thrived with the changes. Overall, student marking period grades increased appreciably. Findings suggest that interactive methods of reading allowed greater student voice and choice of content and method of studying literature. Teachers revitalized themselves and their classrooms. (Contains 44 references.) (RS)

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OBJECTIVES

This study of two teachers and four secondary level English classes examined how traditional methods of teaching literature were replaced by more interactive and integrated approaches to text, based primarily upon a Whole Language philosophy. The purpose for this study was to analyze the consequent changes in student and teacher perceptions and actions regarding their roles in the study of literature and to consider the impact on student learning.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Traditional English classrooms are ordinarily organized in row and column seating arrangements, centering upon the teacher who follows a prescribed curriculum and directs the class and instruction. While this approach works for some, it often leaves many students in a passive role, conforming to standard, linear, discrete, and sequential transmission of information.

In contrast, Whole Language philosophy approaches the learning of language and literature as individual, recursive, and social. Flexible in physical space, social interaction, and content choice, Whole Language can create situations for meaningful expression of ideas in an on-going process, fostering a community of learners.

Like the evolution of the teaching of writing (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Elbow, 1981; Graves, 1983), the teaching of reading becomes an interactive process between reader and text (Applebee, 1974, 1991; Cooper, 1985; Probst, 1988; Rosenblatt, 1978). The

individual learner takes charge of the material and his response to it, with the teacher facilitating, rather than pronouncing specific interpretations.

Interactive reading methods reflect a) the sociological view of school as a transformative vehicle in which students learn to question, to risk, to ascertain (Bernstein, 1975; Giroux, 1988); b) the sociolinguistic view in which the study of language serves as an expressive process by which one forms one's reality (Vygotsky, 1978; Watt, 1989); and c) the psychological view that reflective practice becomes a means for more thoughtful and effective communication between teacher and student (Schon, 1983; Shulman, 1990).

Interactive reading methods apply a) cooperative learning methods of alternative groupings and peer support which encourage positive interdependence, active learning, shared-decision making, and self and/or joint assessment (Johnson et al., 1984; Noddings, 1990); b) cognitive theories which value personalization, prior knowledge, self-regulatory skills, self-directed learning and collaboration (Bruner, 1966; Glaser, 1990; Glasser, 1986; Keefe, 1989; Walberg, 1990); and c) environmental ecology concepts of physical setting, trust, control, proxemics, pace, convention, communication, and tone which create an atmosphere that governs the type and degree of exchange of feelings and ideas (Bernstein, 1975; Glasser, 1986; Grannis, 1980; Hall, 1966; Heyman, 1978; Koneya, 1976).

Considered together, these diverse understandings suggest real reasons for moving away from traditional instruction.

Implementing changes in the study of literature requires a

reorganization of physical space, social interactions, and curricular emphases. Rows and columns transform into movable literacy-rich settings which invite a range of activities in response to literature. Students confer and pursue avenues of thought which are then shared with classmates. Learner choice and inclination gain importance within curricular parameters. The entire setting invites freedom to delve into a variety of issues related to the text.

PARTICIPANTS

This study took place in a traditional junior-senior high school which houses 1,000 students, grades 7 through 12. The district does not subscribe to a Whole Language philosophy and only one faculty member, out of a staff of a hundred, has recently been implementing cooperative learning. The ten member English department, headed by the same chairperson for 20 years, remained traditional though they attended state conferences where Whole Language has been presented.

The two veteran English teachers who volunteered for this study, wanted to "update" and "upgrade" their teaching methods, which they felt had gotten "stale." The eighth and ninth graders selected for the study were considered of average ability, according to course grades, teacher recommendations, and standardized test scores.

OVERALL RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was mainly a qualitative case study because of the match between interactive reading methods and qualitative research, both of which depend upon process, collaboration, and inductive reasoning. No pre-defined hypotheses governed the study; patterns

unfolded and insights emerged. The researcher grounded observations in the real-life setting, charting lesson structures and obtaining detailed notes of situations, actions, and reactions. The impressions of both teachers and students, captured in their own words through classroom discourse, journal entries, and audiotaped and transcribed interviews, added rich, thick descriptions of the tenor of the settings.

The intervention aspect of the study purposely remained open-ended to accommodate each teacher's understandings and preferences. This method of developing insight through individual choice and learning style enabled the teachers to experience in their own growth the model they presented to their students. Not restricted by any pre-determined set of interventions, teachers received coaching by suggestion or upon request, supplemented by professional literature, and always left open to interpretation.

The teachers and the students, to a lesser degree, functioned as co-researchers, determining the courses of action and contributing explanations for the results. The tacit knowledge of the active involvement of students and consequent changes in role perceptions gradually evolved. Two case studies emerged - one per teacher.

Because of the heuristic and contextual nature of qualitative research, in general, and of case studies, in particular, this freedom of study design, implementation, and analysis existed (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990; Merriam, 1990). Built-in, weekly, three-way meetings between researcher and teachers created the necessary interaction for grounded theory to become operative (Chenitz &

Swanson, 1986; Strauss, 1990). These sessions fostered dialogue to review, reflect, revaluate, and refocus.

The quantitative element in the study rested mainly in surveys of actual and preferred classroom climate, before and after changes occurred. Teacher tests and student work samples, collected throughout the study, provided means for qualitative analysis, while gradebook records of student scores before and during the study lent themselves to quantitative description.

LIMITATIONS

First, the study involved only two teachers, both volunteers who actively sought avenues for professional development. Their enthusiasm greatly contributed to the success of the study, reflecting the literature of change which promotes change from the bottom up (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Fullan, 1982; Sarason, 1982).

Second, the fact that researcher and teachers have been acquainted for years leads to questions of bias. However, this factor proved more positive than detrimental since mutual respect based upon having worked well together facilitated trust and openness. The preconceptions, orientations, and philosophies of the researcher and the teachers impacted the study. However, the documented thoughts and impressions of researcher, teachers and students created running records, available for ready reference. Furthermore, any one view became balanced in the process of negotiating the direction and progress of the study through joint data analysis with reference to student input. Thus, a measure of

triangulation was built into the design to strengthen the dependability or consistency of data, as well as the interpretation of findings - available in the audit trail.

Third, the number of students raises questions. But the four classes involved over 100 students, a fair representation of the average student in this school.

Fourth, the constraints of the traditional school setting presented concerns about acceptance. However, the positive reactions of students to interactive reading spread to others.

Fifth, time proved another limitation. The study encompassed the third quarter, which meant that teacher and students knew each other well. Their mutual respect did prove helpful, but some students disliked changing the established routines. In addition, the marking period represented only one quarter of a full school year. The length of the study served to introduce the concept of interactive reading, but the last quarter centered on preparation for district final exams, limiting experimentation.

PROCEDURES

In Phase One, the researcher spent two weeks observing all classes taught by both teachers to gauge teachers' perceptions regarding their role in the classroom, particularly in the study of literature. Charts of activity formats (R- Burns and Andersons, 1987), combined with researcher's field notes to document data.

Students and teachers completed a set of surveys, the Individualised Classroom Environment Questionnaire (Fraser, 1986),

to indicate their assessment of teaching and learning in the classroom and wrote journal entries describing what they liked and what they wished to change about their usual literature lessons.

In Phase Two, teachers read literature regarding interactive teaching methods (Probst, 1988; Rosenblatt, 1978). For five weeks, ongoing coaching sessions and researcher participant observations enabled teachers and students to experiment with interactive methods in terms of reading. Lesson structure charts, student and teacher journal entries, recorded interviews, anecdotal notes, tests, and student work samples comprised the data collection.

In Phase Three, students and teachers completed surveys again, assessing the changed classroom climate and wrote journal entries about experiencing the entire study.

DATA ANALYSIS

In keeping with grounded theory, data analysis occurred on an on-going basis. During each phase, adjustments in plans, actions and perceptions resulted from insights gathered as the study proceeded. The spiral nature of this qualitative study generated a number of interesting occurrences: the number of target classes expanded, learning environments were reassessed prior to any specific reading instruction changes, and considerations of trust, control, choice and appropriate classroom roles surfaced.

The researcher and teachers analyzed changes collaboratively. Field notes and activity structure schemata recorded student and teacher reactions to the changes and the differences in their

interactions. Work samples and tests reflected changes in achievement. Student and teacher journal entries expressed reactions, reflections, suggestions, and complaints. Weekly meetings of the teachers and researcher dealt with attempted changes, future directions, and additional readings.

The final phase entailed the refinement of innovations. Individual student interviews offered reactions and concerns, requests and comments. Teachers integrated new insights about teaching and learning, adjusting their planning and classroom activities accordingly. The follow-up visit of the researcher and completion of the surveys indicated the extent to which the actions and perceptions of respective roles had changed.

Two brief sketches of the case studies follow to provide the reader with glimpses of the actual changes.

CASE STUDY - LORRAINE AND HER STUDENTS

Lorraine, the ninth grade teacher, had taught in a number of school districts over a span of time, broadening her perspective of teaching and learning. However, participating in the study helped her identify the aspects of teaching which had come to harness her thinking and restrict creativity. Collaborating with the researcher and her students, Lorraine decidedly dropped inhibiting methods she had developed over the years and invited and weighed suggestions, adapting them to her needs and those of her students.

Lorraine recognized the extent to which she had been dominating the entire teaching/learning situation and noted the consequent

negative effect on students. Gradually, as Lorraine relinquished control, trusting her students more and more, her students became more involved. Students wrote joint essays on literary topics of their choosing. Conferring about what they had read sparked higher level thinking and more critical comment. Writing improved markedly as the chances for collaboration and original expression increased.

Rather than assign one novel for homework and another for class, as she had in the past, Lorraine taught two novels simultaneously by dividing the class in half - one for each novel. Using the mini-lesson concept, she taught terms, such as theme, and then allowed students to work in groups to apply the terms to the works they were reading. When groups reported back to the class, students expressed interest in both works; some students actually asked for permission to read both books. Extending interactive reading further, Lorraine encouraged students to research authors and works rather than copy teacher-prepared information. In her own words, Lorraine concluded

> I feel I learned a new approach which I can implement in my daily teaching with any class. This method not only includes student involvement, it is centered around student involvement and response. I saw students who hadn't succeeded in my class become actively involved and move from failing to passing levels. This is an exciting adventure - because I'm not the only one in the classroom who is excited!

Students responded positively right from the start. They had desired more interaction with each other and more opportunity to investigate the material in their own way. They appreciated the degree to which Lorraine acted upon their recommendations. Though students struggled with the realities of groupwork at first, they persisted because they preferred the changed classroom climate.

They felt they had come to know classmates better, had explored ideas more thoroughly, and had learned more by working cooperatively. They sensed Lorraine had become more involved in their work because what they contributed had become more meaningful to them.

CASE STUDY - SARAH AND HER STUDENTS

Sarah had taught in this one school for her full 20 year career. She yearned to stimulate her students to enjoy intellectual pursuits, but felt the traditional school setting had inhibited her. She wanted to lighten the burden teaching had become. More traditional than she had realized, she quickly sensed she would need to restructure her teaching theory and practice. She accepted the challenge with determination and resolve, identifying control as the major issue in her classroom.

Her eighth graders liked and admired Sarah's intense desire to get them to learn, but they resisted her regimentation and disciplinary methods which stifled many. They thrived with the changes. Literature had been routine and tedious, with specific chapters and study guide questions assigned and reviewed. Many students had not been reading. Sarah grouped students to identify main characters and to prepare poster-sized reports to present to the class. Non-readers began to consult the text more than once to quote and verify.

Changing incrementally, Sarah allowed students to pose questions about their reading, to be answered in small groups. Students began reading more to be able to work with their peers. Sarah experimented with peer reading response partners and eventually freed

students to develop their own topics for discussion and writing. Students integrated social studies knowledge with the settings of the literary works. They graphically illustrated key symbols and enjoyed the interdisciplinary nature of associative thinking.

In the end, Sarah realized students had learned so much in the process of analyzing various aspects of the reading that she surprised herself and her students by not giving a final test. Her concept of assessment had broadened. She even included students in evaluating some of their own and each other's classwork - a refreshing twist which led them to exercise and defend reasoned judgments.

Overall, student marking period grades increased appreciably. Some students not only raised their averages from failing to passing grades, but some jumped as much as 10 to 20 points. In Sarah's words

> the students had to work because they could not coast on my effort and tune in only once in a while. There is no place to hide in a small group. In addition, when the group reports are given, the students do not want to look foolish.

Sarah redefined much of her role, incorporating many student suggestions in lesson plans. As a result, the students became much more active. No longer depending upon the teacher for direction, they began to assess their own progress, design follow-up plans, and proceed independently. Sarah and her students enjoyed the new ownership students had in their own learning.

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The actions and perceptions of students and teachers regarding their roles changed drastically. Interactive methods of reading allowed greater student voice and choice of content and method of

studying literature. Students read more and expressed more interest in the specific works they read. Teachers extended interactive reading methods to all classes, planning cooperative learning activities and assessment measures, which led students to talk and write about literature in greater depth and detail.

Teachers achieved their intended goal of revitalizing themselves and their classrooms as they drew upon students as resources in a newly created community of learners. Participating in an open-ended study had allowed both teachers to revaluate their understandings and practices regarding the teaching of literature. Becoming active researchers and reflective collaborators had fortified them to allow joint control. In turn, increased trust had empowered students to take ownership and invest more in the process of learning.

The teachers exercised choice throughout the study and read and discussed educational philosophy, prior to attempting to introduce interactive reading methods. They received steady coaching and support, appreciated the chance to learn from mistakes, and extended the same opportunity to their students whom they increasingly enlisted for input regarding change.

Interactive reading methods, derived from Whole Language philosophy, fit especially well on the secondary level where they possess the potential of transforming English classrooms from formal, structured, uniform and unilateral studies of text to dynamic, social, unique and diverse explorations of literature and its varied meanings to multiple readers.

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